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ABSTRACT

In summer 1982, interviews were conducted in the Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Maricopa County, Miami-Dade, and St. Louis Community College Districts to determine: (1) the prevalence of honors programs in the districts; (2) reasons for initiating the programs; (3) types of honors programs and activities in use; (4) admissions criteria for honors programs; (5) scholarship information; (6) the extent of faculty participation; and (7) perceived benefits. The interviews revealed that nearly all of the colleges with formalized honors programs had initiated them in the past few years to accommodate the increasing number of students who could benefit from the programs, to strengthen the quality of the academic programs and the image of the college, and to attract and retain outstanding students. Several types of programs and activities were in use, including special sections of general education and occupational courses; interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary courses; in-class honors options for additional coursework; honors colloquia coordinated with lecture series; extra-course activities, such as seminars, special projects, and enrichment activities; and the use of faculty mentors. Among the benefits cited by the honors program directors were smaller classes, student recognition, the development of new teaching strategies and courses, and improved college image. Examples of programs at the six districts are cited throughout the report. (KL)

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HONORS PROGRAMS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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HONORS PROGRAMS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The primary concern of community college educators has moved from the attainment of equity in the 60s and 70s to the achievement of quality education in the 80s. One manifestation of this movement toward quality education is the revival of honors programs in community colleges. To illustrate, institutional membership in Phi Theta Kappa, the national honors society for community and junior colleges, has increased from about 500 chapters in 1970 to just over 700 chapters in 1982. Similarly, the number of community colleges belonging to the National Collegiate Honors Council has grown since 1970.

Honors programs represent an institution's attempts to meet the educational needs of its ablest and most highly motivated students. Such programs typically include one or more of the following components: special sections of classes for honors students, in-course honors activities, independent study, special scholarships for honors students, and recognition of honors status on transcripts.

In the summer of 1982, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges conducted interviews with persons responsible for honors programs in each of the six districts participating in the Transfer and Liberal Arts Projects (Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Maricopa, Miami-Dade, and St. Louis). The information obtained from these interviews is summarized in this paper.

REASONS FOR INITIATING HONORS PROGRAMS

Nearly all of the colleges within the six districts that have established a formalized honors program have done so within the last few years. To illustrate, the governing board of the Maricopa Community College District approved funds for the development and implementation of a district-wide honors program in

summer 1981. Miami-Dade initiated a formal honors program in fall 1982. Up until now this college has offered special classes and activities for its gifted students. West Los Angeles College is beginning a series of honors courses in fall 1982, while the honors programs at Chicago's Loop College and Dallas' Richland College were launched within the past two years.

Program administrators' responses to the question on why an honors program was started at their college were remarkably similar. Without exception, the persons interviewed noted that, until recently, their college had concentrated its efforts on helping the whole range of students with special needs except for one group -- the academically advanced student. The most frequently mentioned reasons for starting an honors program were as follows: (1) An increasing number of students who are attending community colleges can benefit from honors courses and programs; (2) honors programs are part of college-wide efforts to strengthen the quality of their academic programs, particularly in the area of general education; (3) honors programs can assist community college educators in their efforts to attract and retain outstanding students and faculty; and (4) these programs can enhance the public image of the institution as a place where superior scholarship is honored and encouraged.

SPECIAL SECTIONS OF COURSES

A common approach in providing honors instruction to students is to offer special sections of general education and occupational program courses. These honors sections differ from the regular sections of the course in that students are provided with more opportunities for creative thought and discussion as well as research and questioning. For example, at Miami-Dade, honors courses differ from regular courses in that students are asked to read more primary source materials, cover the subject areas in greater depth, and write more papers.

Honors classes are typically restricted in size to encourage maximum faculty-student interaction. A major advantage of honors courses is that they provide students with an opportunity to work with other students of similar abilities and interests.

INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSES

Several of the colleges are presenting their honors offerings in an interdisciplinary course format. Mountain View College (Dallas) has a series of offerings in its honors program in which courses from two disciplines are paired. Examples of these honors courses include pairing world literature with world civilization, American literature with American history, and the first and second semester of English composition with the first and second semesters of humanities. These courses are coupled so that students in the composition classes write about topics related to their humanities classes.

Most students in Miami-Dade's South Campus College Honors Program begin their studies by enrolling in a cross-disciplinary set of honors courses. Students majoring in the sciences enroll in a group of honors courses for Science majors, consisting of history of Science, English composition and humanities. Students in this program are given a unique perspective on science by studying major scientific revelations along with the humanities of each era.

Students who are majoring in the liberal arts, who are undecided, or who plan to major in other subjects, enroll in a two-semester sequence of honors courses. Each semester consists of courses in English, world history and either humanities or a survey of world literature. The honors courses are taught by interdisciplinary teams of professors and carry nine credits.

IN-CLASS HONORS OPTION

At many colleges students are given the option of earning honors credit in a course by completing additional activities. This is the case at Chicago's Loop College and Dallas' Eastfield College. Faculty members interested in having an honors option as part of their course develop an addendum to their class syllabus. This addendum, which consists of extra requirements and activities the student must complete to receive honors credit, must be submitted to the honors committee for approval.

An innovative approach enabling students to receive honors credit in courses that do not have honors sections is in place at Rio Salado College (Phoenix). In order to gain honors credit for a non-honors course, the student and the instructor must complete a Course Evaluation Plan (CEP). The CEP is a form of contract in which the student agrees to do one or more special assignments in order to earn honors credit. Special assignments might include additional reading, library research, field projects, or class presentations. There is an explicit provision in the CEP for consultation between the student and the instructor and the means by which the student's work will be evaluated.

HONORS COLLOQUIA

Many community colleges have outside speakers' programs in which distinguished lecturers are invited to the campus. Administrators at Maricopa Community College District, Miami-Dade, and Richland and Mountain View colleges in Dallas have capitalized upon the visits of the distinguished lecturers by arranging for them to conduct special seminars, workshops, and conferences for honors students.

Each year, as part of the Honors Forum Series, six notable speakers are invited to the Maricopa Community College District for two or three days to

give lectures, seminars, and meet with interested students and staff members. The lectures are given by outstanding humanists, scientists, industrialists, and social leaders who address a specific issue from the perspective of their discipline. The theme for the 1982-83 Forum Series is Technology: Its Impact on the Individual and Society.

The District has developed a special honors course based on the lectures given in the forum series. The course description for this seminar reads as follows: "Interdisciplinary studies of selected issues confronting the individual and society. Formal lectures are followed by informal discussions with outstanding scholars and social leaders. The lectures are supplemented by readings and pre- and post-forum discussion and critique." In terms of assignments, students are asked to prepare written and oral summaries in which they: (1) accurately summarize the issues addressed during the term; (2) compare and contrast the rationale, perspective and conclusions of the authors and lecturers; and (3) clearly define and adequately defend personal conclusions about the issue.

Another approach of coordinating an honors program with a college's visiting lecture series is to have honors students who are enrolled in different courses attend the guest lectures and special seminars as part of their class work. For example, a recent theme of Mountain View College's visiting speakers program was Science: the Good, the Bad, the Ugly. Students from the history classes studied the topics from a historical perspective, students from literature from a literary perspective, and so on. Students in technology programs as well as the liberal arts were involved in this effort.

EXTRA-COURSE ACTIVITIES

An important component of honors programs is the extra-course activities. A recent study showed that the majority of the Illinois community colleges with honors programs sponsored special social activities for honors students, recognition banquets, special education-intellectual activities, recognition at graduation, affiliation with the state honors council, and opportunities for special research. These activities as well as honors seminars, special honors projects, and enrichment activities were identified in the telephone interviews.

Honors Seminars. Students in Miami-Dade's South Campus College Honors Program are asked to reserve an hour a week for meetings and seminars. This time is used for meetings with faculty mentors, distinguished visiting professors and other guest lecturers as well as for leadership training activities. The honors seminars at Miami-Dade's North Campus are offered on topics of interest to students in the sciences, humanities, and technology. These seminars are designed to provide students with the opportunity to explore an area of interest with the guidance of a faculty mentor.

Honors Project. A major component of the honors programs at Miami-Dade is the Capstone Project. Students are asked to complete a special three-credit hour project, creative or scholarly, which demonstrates their skills in research and in applying and presenting material.

Enrichment Activities. In addition to taking honors courses, students in the honors programs at some colleges such as Miami-Dade and Los Rios College (Phoenix) are required to make a contract with their faculty advisor to participate in academic enrichment activities that will help them to achieve their goals. These contracts include such activities as working with a faculty member on a research project, putting on a special event for the college, and participating

in an off-campus internship.

Participation in conferences sponsored by such organizations as Phi Theta Kappa, the Western Region Honors Council, and the National Collegiate Honors Council represents another form of enrichment activity available to honors students. For example, the director of Glendale Community College (Phoenix) and two honors students attended the Western Region Honors Council's conference held in Alburquerque, New Mexico.

FACULTY MENTORS

At some colleges honors students are assigned to individual faculty mentors whose interests correspond to their own. The mentors, who are associated with the honors program, meet with the advisee regularly to explore interests, educational and career objectives, and to discuss a wide range of pertinent issues. Loop College and Wright College in Chicago, and Miami-Dade are among the institutions where faculty mentor programs have been initiated.

ADMISSIONS CRITERIA

Requirements for entrance into honors programs are based typically on the following factors: an ACT score of 25 or a combined score of 1100 on the SAT, cumulative grade point average in high school or college of 3.5 on a 4 point scale, demonstration of special talents and abilities, and interviews with members of the college's honors committee. In most instances, students need to meet at least two of the criteria specified for admissions into the honors program.

In order to remain in honors programs students must maintain a certain grade point average (usually the same GPA as that required to enter the program), complete a specified number of honors courses, and participate in enrichment activities agreed upon by the student and the honors advisor.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Scholarships, usually in the form of fee waivers, are given to students enrolled in honors programs at Miami-Dade. Students enrolled in an honors program in the Maricopa Community College District are eligible for fee waivers if they have a 3.5 grade point average. At Dallas' Eastfield and Richland Colleges there are no scholarships given to participants in the honors programs. There are, however, a number of merit scholarships intended for highly motivated and capable students.

FACULTY PARTICIPATION

Faculty members who participate in honors programs do so on a voluntary basis. At most colleges, instructors who are interested in converting a course into an honors course must submit a proposal to the college honors committee, curriculum committee, and/or department for approval. Honors courses are taught by faculty as part of their regular course load. Usually there are no financial awards or release time given for participation in an honors program. However, at Miami-Dade, faculty who serve as mentors receive a reduction in their advisee load to compensate for the extra time spent with the honors students. The primary incentive for teaching an honors course is to have the professional development opportunity to work with highly-motivated and talented students. Other benefits of participating in an honors program include the opportunity to develop new and challenging courses; attend social events such as dinners for honors faculty; receive special recognition from the college administration; and meet honors faculty from different disciplines to discuss courses and instructional methods used in working with outstanding students.

With respect to training, a number of community colleges sponsor workshops for faculty interested in teaching honors courses. These workshops focus on such topics as how to convert a regular course into an honors course, methods of working with talented students and serving as a faculty mentor. Additional training opportunities are available to the faculty through activities sponsored by Phi Theta Kappa (the national honors society for community and junior colleges) and the National Collegiate Honors Council.

BENEFITS OF HONORS PROGRAMS

Students, faculty, and the college itself can benefit from honors programs. Benefits for students include small classes with outstanding faculty and students, opportunities to work with instructors on special projects, participation in honors-related events, and recognition of honors achievements on transcripts, certificates, and diplomas. Completion of honors programs can also help students gain entrance into top colleges and universities. For example, Chicago's Loop College has a tentative agreement with three private universities to give preferential treatment to students who have completed the honors program. Students who complete the honors program at Miami-Dade will have letters describing the quality of their work forwarded to four-year institutions or potential employers.

Faculty members can derive a number of benefits by participating in honors programs. These benfits include working with gifted students, developing new courses and instructional approaches to meet the needs of the students, and discussing their courses and teaching strategies with honors faculty in other subject areas.

Honors programs can also have a positive effect on the overall quality of a community college's educational offerings. A well-developed and visible

honors program can contribute to the building of quality by attracting and retaining outstanding faculty members and students, and by enhancing the public image of the institution as a place that encourages academic excellence. Developing honors courses and curricula often results in the generation of innovative ideas that can benefit the entire institution. Special interdisciplinary, team taught courses and curricula, honors seminars, courses based on a college's visiting speakers series, and faculty mentors are among the many innovations that have grown out of community college honors programs.

Community colleges nationwide are striving to strengthen the quality of their educational programs. A well-developed and visible honors program can contribute greatly to the attainment of this important objective.

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